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an appraisal of the bilingual problem in canada and south africa

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The Problem

It has been stated that language is in the first place **an expression of culture in the full sense of the word;** from the intellectual standpoint language is certainly the most typical expression of culture. As a means of communication, language is the natural vehicle for a host of other elements of culture. Language not only conveys the notions and modes of expression which are part of a culture, but is also the means by which a cultural group discovers and assimilates the new elements originating inside it.[1]

Within this context the problem arises as to whether it is possible for peoples of different language groups fully to understand each other without understanding each others' language and then their culture. One cannot think as a French Canadian unless one speaks French or an Afrikaans-speaking South African unless one speaks Afrikaans.

This point, together with the problems which result from an inability to understand one's fellow man, has been forcibly brought home to South Africans and Canadians through political, economic, social and educational upheavals.

In recent provincial by-elections in South Africa, much has been made of the antagonism between the two major White language groups. In all the institutions of society — political, religious, economic and educational — little effort has been made to draw the White population of South Africa together.

Broadly speaking, South African political parties are divided along language lines; most Afrikaans-speaking people adhere to the Dutch Reformed Church whilst the English-speaking community is predominantly heterogeneous in terms of religious beliefs. In the economic world, where the management of business enterprises is predominantly English-speaking; English is spoken; where the management is mainly Afrikaans-speaking, Afrikaans is spoken. There does not appear to be much evidence of bilingualism. Under the South African educational system, English and Afrikaans-speaking children are completely separated. Mr. M. Steyn quoted in "The Star" on May 16th, 1972, said that "South Africans are divided into two hostile, mistrusting camps, the Afrikaners hating the English and the English hating the Afrikaners".[2] The Minister of Defence said in Parliament that a South African who preferred to speak his own language hated the other language.

A complete reorganisation of the country's educational system may be necessary in order to bring about real friendship between the language groups. Children are taught to regard their neighbours as foreigners because they have been separated from each other throughout their school lives.

It is clear that South Africa has a nationwide, all-embracing problem which may possibly begin with the alienation of the language groups in her schools.

Canada shares this problem. In principle, the Canadian Government's upgrading of French, the first language of twenty-eight per cent of Canada's people, is hailed as a major contribution to national unity. But in practice, as daily incidents show, the Official Languages Act, making French the equal of English throughout the Government Service, has irritated more than it has soothed.[3]

The most serious controversies have arisen in the national capital where Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau is trying to build an exemplary bilingual system in the civil service, where the employees interact with French-speaking citizens. The reaction to this of English-speaking Canadians resulted in a major campaign issue for the general elections held in October, 1972.

As in South Africa, the two language groups in Canada are split along religious lines. Most French-speaking Canadians are Roman Catholic whilst most of the English-speaking sector adhere to the Anglican or other Protestant churches. In industry, French-speaking Canadians fill most of the un-skilled and semi-skilled jobs whilst the managerial positions are held predominantly by English-speaking Canadians.

The violence of a few citizens in Quebec symbolized the continuing social and economic problems of the province.[4] The French Canadian Separatist Group kidnapped two high officials,. James R. Cross, British Trade Commissioner in Montreal, and Quebec Labour Minister Pierre Laporte on the 5th and 10th October, 1970, respectively. The murder of Laporte, a French Canadian opposed to the separatist movement, stunned the nation. Cross was found by the police and released unharmed. The whole incident, however, gives an insight into the desperate situation which exists between the two language groups in Canada.

Each province in the Federation of Canada enacts its own educational policy. Sometimes, the existence of a French-speaking community has been ignored with the result that, encouraged by Mr. Trudeau's bilingual policy, French Canadian families in Ottawa and the surrounding communities along the Ontario-Quebec border are urging their school boards for more all-French schools.

It would appear that Canada and South Africa have many historical, political, social, economic and educational problems in common. It is conceivable that a change in the educational policy of these two countries could solve many of the language problems which hinder the progress of both countries. It is possible that South Africans, by observing what is happening in another bilingual country, may better understand their own problems and attempt solution of them in the light of errors made, or solutions formulated, in Canada.

Historical background

South Africa and Canada have two official languages principally because people of differing nationalities first colonized them.

It was the French who first discovered and colonized Canada. Later the English came and took over the fur trade. As they did this, the French moved on to open up new areas of the country. Together with the war France was fighting in Europe came wars between the French and English colonists of Canada. By a peace treaty in 1763, after a series of wars lasting intermittently for seventy years, during which time various North American territories changed hands between Great Britain and France, Canada finally came under British rule. In 1867 Canada became a self governing confederation of states within the British Commonwealth.

Canadian history can be viewed as a series of conflicts between two ethnic groups: one of French descent and the other of English descent.

A similar situation arose in South Africa. The first settlers at the Cape were the Dutch who came to establish a refreshment station at the Cape. Due to wars in Europe between Holland and England, the Cape came under English rule for the second and final time in 1814. It remained in English hands from then until the individual territories were granted independence. In 1910, the provinces were formed into the Union of South Africa.

As the French had done in Canada, so the Dutch opened up the land in South Africa, while trade grew in the hands of the English.

The Dutch language became modified and developed into Afrikaans which was accepted as the other official language in place of Dutch in 1925.

Education in Canada

As each province in Canada is responsible for its own education there is no uniform education policy.

In British Columbia "No special action or method has been adopted in handling bilingualism and and biculturalism".[5] It is felt that, at present, the proportion of French-speaking parents in the province is not sufficient to warrant the establishment of special schools in which French would be the language of instruction. French may be studied as a second language, however.

Prince Edward Island has not yet been officially designated a bilingual province, so instruction is through the medium of English. Efforts are being made, however, to have French taught as a second language to as many students as possible. "In areas where French is the majority language among parents and pupils, this language is recognised as the first language and programmes of studies are devised to expose pupils to a bilingual education".[6]

In Newfoundland and Labrador, it is felt, once again, that the proportion of French-speaking people is not sufficient to warrant anything but English-medium schools. Except for one school in Labrador, all schools use English as the medium of instruction.

In Nova Scotia, the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories a similar situation exists. French is taught only as a second language in the English-medium schools.

In those provinces where a sufficient proportion of inhabitants is French-speaking, some effort is being made to enable these people to be taught in their home language. The degree to which both official languages are being used in education depends upon this proportion.

The **Official Languages of New Brunswick Act** of 1909 laid down that children are to be taught through the medium of their mother tongue and that the other official language is to be taught as a second language.

A similar situation exists in Manitoba where Bill 113, an Act to amend the **Public School Act (2) of 1970,** stated that English and French, the two official languages, are to be the languages of instruction in school. Instruction in the other official language may be given where there are twenty-eight or more pupils in an elementary grade who may be grouped in a class for instruction; where there are twenty-three or more pupils in a secondary grade, provided parents wish them to be instructed in the official language other than the one used in the school.

In Ontario the same situation results if the number of pupils in a class who wish to be taught in French exceeds thirty children. If the numbers are deemed sufficient by the school boards concerned, French medium schools may be set up. Despite this, however, English is an obligatory daily subject of instruction for all pupils in grades nine to twelve inclusive and is a required subject for each certificate and diploma issued for standing in these grades. Mr. Davis, Prime Minister of Ontario, said in 1971, "We will provide education wherever feasible, to students of the French-speaking and English-speaking minority in the language of that minority. We will also provide them with the means to acquire a good command of the language of the majority".[7]

In the School Act of Alberta, 1970, it was established that a school board could authorize that French be used as a language of instruction in addition to the English Language in all or any of its schools. Where this is done, one hour of instruction in the English language is required daily during the first two years a pupil attends school, and in all subsequent years French may be used as the language of instruction to a maximum of 50% of the instructional time for each school day.

From this information it can be concluded that Alberta is working towards a system of bilingual education. At present, research into the most adequate bilingual educational policy is being done, the results of which have yet to be seen.

In Quebec, French is the language of instruction in most schools. Whilst children may receive instruction in the English language if the parents so desire, instruction is generally in French and all schools must move towards a system of instruction in the French language.

Education in South Africa

In 1949 a new language Ordinance was passed which stated that **the home language of the child was to be the compulsory medium of instruction up to and including standard eight and that both official languages were to be studied for a matriculation certificate, one in the higher and the other in the lower grade.**

This policy is put into practice through the use of unilingual schools. Only where numbers of the other language group are less than 0,3% of the population in an area, may parallel medium schools be set up. This is

for ease of administration as the policy is to set up single medium schools.

Evaluation of the situation

Canada's survival as a political system depends upon a successful accommodation of its language problem. Canadian bilingualism involves equal legal status for Canada's two languages. In actual fact, however, the French Canadians are under much more compelling pressures to learn English than English Canadians are to learn French.

Bilingualism becomes an issue through conflicting claims for official recognition, and where there are differences in religion and class between the two language groups. Walter B. Simon maintains that bilingualism is a source of conflict within a political system:—

(i) In industrial urban societies, where official recognition of languages affects careers in all services provided by public institutions.

(ii) When members of different language groups are under unequal pressures to learn the language of others.

(iii) When the most important language within a political system is also the most important abroad and

(iv) When the direction and/or intensity of pressure on groups in changing.[8]

All these conflicts exist in Canada and many could be eliminated if the two federally recognized official languages were on an equal footing, nationally speaking. To put both languages on an equal footing the majority of people must be bilingual. This can only be accomplished with the help of the educational policy, but a review of the educational policies of the separate provinces shows a singular lack of effort in this direction, with the exception of Alberta where research into this problem is under way.

A number of parallel situations exist and have existed between South Africa and Canada. The histories of both countries can be seen as a struggle between the two language groups for recognition. The conflict between the two language groups still exists because the different languages of the two groups perpetuate the cultural differences.

The separation of children into different schools in terms of language in South Africa caused T. J. Haarhoff to say, "We live in a Union that is not a union and under a bilingual system that is not bilingual. Yet, if the two main White races are to continue side by side in South Africa, it is imperative that we should create a unity (which is different from uniformity) and that we should be able to communicate with each other without strain, and that is only possible if we speak each other's languages".[9]

More recently, Dr. Van Ryneveld Steynberg put forward the idea that "A complete rethink of the country's educational system is necessary if there is ever to be real friendship between the two language groups. Children are made to regard their neighbours as foreigners because they have been separated from each other throughout their lives. The only answer is to have bilingual schools, where each official language is spoken on successive days and where staff give equal rights to both".[10]

Recommendation for bilingual education

Dr. Van Ryneveld Steynberg feels that the only way to develop "South African" South African citizens, is to subject them to bilingual education. Through the research being done in Alberta at the moment it has become evident that there is much to commend this type of education.

"The usual definition of a bilingual school is one in which two official languages are used concurrently as the medium of instruction for any part of the curriculum except the languages themselves".[11]

Support for the concept of bilingual education appears to be increasing. In the United States of America, bilingual education was advocated for American children whose mother tongue was Spanish.

Donald D. Walsh maintains that a child in any culture or country must become literate in his own language but, in addition, should the country be bilingual, he must learn the other language of the culture or country until his command of that language is strong enough to enable him to receive some of his instruction in that language.[12]

It is felt that, "The major purpose of education is to provide opportunities for the de-

velopment of self actualized individuals who improve and enjoy the social and physical environment in which they live";[13] whether they form part of the majority of society or one of the many minority groups, and whether they communicate in one language exclusively or in more than one language.

"By providing learning opportunities for students for the purpose of acquiring the facility to express themselves readily in two languages, they become aware of two cultures in a direct manner. With awareness, it is hoped that an appreciation and understanding of these two cultures will also be effected!"[14]

The aim of a bilingual school would therefore be to encourage the development of individuals who can function linguistically and socially in two cultures.

Through bilingual schools we can have a truly bilingual country in fhich each language group, while retaining its language and culture, fully understands and appreciates the language and culture of the other ethnic group. It is only through communicating with other individuals that we might hope to perceive their needs and understand their actions. The most efficient means of communication is through language but, unless people have a common understanding of each other's language, this line of communication is severed.

A bilingual system is not without problems. At its inception there will be a lack of teachers versatile in both languages, a lack of textbooks (if they are felt to be necessary) in both languages which are easy enough for someone new to the language to understand, and most children will be unable even to understand the other official language when they start school, let alone communicate by means of it. However, these problems could all be overcome within a few generations and the system would, in the long run, be worth the initial difficulties.

E. G. Malherbe pointed out that, "Whereas the unilingual school is a device which avoids the solution of our difficulties by side stepping them, the bilingual school is the hard way. But it is the only sure and true way in the long run![15]

It may well be the hard way but both Canada and South Africa have at present in their countries, a situation which, generated by a unilingual, separatist policy, is causing a rift in the societies of each country. Neither country can afford to be split up into two hostile groups, for, from an economic and political standpoint, "Unity is Strength". This unity within society can only be attained through mutual understanding and respect. As one of the major institutions of society, the educational institution could be used as a powerful weapon for attaining this end and the means is through bilingual education in dual medium schools.

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